DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 196 515 PS 011 302

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TITLE On Being a Parent.

INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, Urbana, Ill.: Memphis State Univ., Tenn.
SPONS AGENCY National Inst. of Education (DHEW), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE Dec 80
CONTRACT 400-78-0008
NOTE 13p.: Paper presented at the Symposium on Parenting, Memphis State University (Memphis, TN, March 31, 1980).
AVAILABLE FROM In "Parenthood in a Changing Society" available from: ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, College of Education, University of Illinois, 1310 South Sixth Street, Champaign, IL 61820 (Catalog No. 190, $5.00)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Child Advocacy: *Family Environment: *Fathers: Individual Differences: *Parent Influence: Parent Responsibility: *Parent Role: *Personality
IDENTIFIERS *Parenting

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the stresses our society places on parents, the influence of fathers on their children's development, how parents can actively influence development, individual differences in temperament among children, and environmental as well as ecological factors that affect the development of children. Concluding remarks focus on the responsibility of parents to be advocates for children. In particular, it is recommended that parents enter the public arena and lobby for policies and practices that are in the interest of children in their neighborhoods and communities. (Author/RH)

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On Being A Parent*

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Being a parent in our society is a difficult and often anxiety-producing job. The parent who is confronted with a tiny, helpless newborn is struck with the awesome responsibilities of helping the child evolve from a dependent, immature and unsocialized infant into an independent, intellectually sophisticated and socially competent human being. The conscientious mother and father are, without question, the most important agents in determining the specific course of their child's growth and development.

The job of parenting is a demanding one that requires considerable attention, knowledge, selflessness and patience. One must work at it consciously and continually, and one must be prepared for the anxieties and doubts which arise when confronted with the question, "Am I a good parent?" The more one wants to be a good parent the more anxious one becomes. Although a certain amount of anxiety is normal and understandable, many parents today tend to be too anxious, and this anxiety has detrimental effects upon the parents themselves, upon their children and upon the parent-child relationship.

Some of this overanxiety can be attributed to the fact that many parents are not as well equipped for parenthood as parents have been in the past. Parents of today often do not have the support for parenting that was once generally available. The extended family is rare in contemporary society, and with its demise the new parent lost the wisdom and daily support of older family members. The increased mobility and new housing patterns of American families have all too often deprived the family of a variety of community activities that supported parenting and family life. Furthermore, as child development experts Myrtle McGraw and Urie Bronfenbrenner have been pointing out for many years, our society has become divided along age lines. Grandparents live far from their grandchildren, children form peer groups early, and older children have greatly reduced responsibilities in caring for the young. Indeed, the generally diminished interaction between adults and children in our society led participants at the 1970 White House Conference on Children to raise the basic issue of how children might be reintroduced into the world of adults.

As a result of these developments, most new parents tend to lack knowledge about how children grow and develop. Moreover, they rarely have immediately at hand loving and experienced adults to assist them through their apprenticeship. Faced with such a state of affairs, parents turn in ever greater numbers to the counsel of distant experts

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* Presented March 31, 1980.

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whose directives are often contradictory and confusing. The lack of knowledge and needed advice has resulted in a situation in which many parents misunderstand the real strengths and needs of both their children and themselves. For example, many parents view their young child as more fragile than he or she really is. These parents have convinced themselves that one misstep in child-rearing will result in horrible, lifelong consequences. For such parents, it would be reassuring to learn what experienced grandparents know intuitively: that even the very young child is a relatively tough, active human being with a personal capacity for growth that almost guarantees a normal course of development, provided that the child is protected from physical harm and is given the love and care of ordinary, devoted parents.

As a result of their isolation and worries, too many parents experience the obligations of child-rearing without the pleasures. In many homes, both parents and children walk about as if on eggshells. The parent-child relationship is characterized by apprehension, joylessness and the pursuit of questionable goals. This state of affairs is in large part an outgrowth of the reliance by parents on the advice of people who claim special scientific expertise about child development.

Parental attitude and child-rearing practices have always tended to follow the thinking of child development experts. Yet developmental psychology is like any other science. At any time, there are differences in opinion, changing viewpoints, and a mixture of sense and nonsense about the practical implications of any laboratory evidence. The parent who is neither familiar with the thousands of studies of child development nor trained in scientific inquiry can easily be steamrollered into believing a point of view which may turn out to be little more than a passing fad. This is usually exacerbated by journalists who rush to tell parents how to improve their children's well-being, generally basing their information on the latest sensational finding from this or that child development laboratory. What parents do not realize is that much of the so-called information about children presented in the popular press is often no more than the writer's interpretation of a tentative hypothesis, a scientist's value judgment, or an unverified hunch. It is our belief that a large part of the current overanxiety of parents stems from just such fads and opinions based on tentative and incomplete views of the developing child.

Although psychologists and other scientists have far to go before arriving at a complete understanding of how a child develops, one of the most significant advances toward this goal is currently being made in the field of child development. From many laboratories in the U.S. and around the world, numerous research findings are converging upon a more comprehensive view of child development. What seems to be emerging is a recognition that the number of factors responsible for a child's growth is much greater than was formerly believed. In addition to the significance of the mother, the importance of the father and of the whole environment--from the influences of schools and television to the availability of medical care and part-time jobs--is being demonstrated. Moreover, studies are finding that the child may play an active role in its own development. Thus, according to the new research findings, a child's development is affected not merely by the

mother, or both mother and father, but by a host of other factors over which parents may or may not have control. These new findings should change a number of ideas that experts and parents have held in the past about child rearing practices.

One of the most long-standing limitations in our thinking about child development has been the notion that the mother is the exclusive agent in determining the child's behavior and psychological adjustment. This notion has been promoted and supported by various schools of thought in psychology. Freud and other psychoanalytic thinkers have exalted the influence of the mother by blaming her for children's neuroses. John Watson, the father of modern behaviorism, claimed that by applying the proper conditioning principles mothers could train a child to become whatever the parents wished--doctor, lawyer, merchant, or artist. And John Bowlby, taking an evolutionary perspective, believed that "a warm, intimate and continuous relationship" with the mother was an essential ingredient for producing mental health in children.

Although the mother's influence cannot be overestimated, psychologists are now discovering that the father also figures prominently in his child's development. Of course, the father has long been recognized as a biological and economic necessity to his children, but until recently his psychological influence was not very much appreciated. Currently, however, psychologists are discovering the significant impact that a father does have on his child. One of the most interesting findings is that young infants develop attachment bonds to their fathers as well as to their mothers. The infant's attachment to the father begins to develop at around the same time in the middle of the first year as its attachment to the mother, even though in the typical American family the father plays no major role in the care of his infant and interacts with the infant no more than an average of ten hours a week. There is, however, a difference in the child's attachment to its mother and father. Michael Lamb (1976) found that generally children show no preference between mother and father but in stressful situations they usually, though not always, prefer their mothers when both parents are available.

The father is not merely a potential substitute mother for times when the mother is looking after chores or is otherwise not available, but contributes qualitatively different experiences to the child. When Michael Lamb (1977) observed both mothers and fathers interacting with their 7- to 13-month-old infants, he found that the two parents played with their babies in different ways and held them for different reasons. Mothers more often played conventional games such as peek-a-boo and pat-a-cake while fathers were more likely to play vigorous, physically stimulating or unpredictable types of games. Mothers held their babies most often for caretaking purposes--to feed or diaper them, and for restricting their exploration. But fathers were more likely to hold their babies just to play with them or to satisfy the babies' desire to be held. By providing their children with different kinds of experiences than mothers do, fathers may actually broaden the scope of their children's social and intellectual competence.

Another difference between mothers' and fathers' behavior toward their children can be seen in the second year. Unlike mothers, fathers begin to treat the sexes differently. They pay special attention to sons but seem to withdraw from daughters (Lamb, 1979). As a result, children--particularly boys--develop a preference for the same-sex parent. This behavior on the part of the father may contribute to the development of the child's gender identity. Other research has shown that boys may become deficient in their sex role adjustment when their fathers are absent during infancy (Biller, 1974).

As children grow older, fathers continue to contribute to sex-role development. For example, fathers who are highly nurturant enhance masculinity in sons and femininity in daughers (Lynn, 1976). Girls with absent fathers may not develop an adequate female role and as adolescents may have difficulties in their relationships with men (Hetherington, 1972). Fathers also contribute to their children's social and moral development, cognitive functioning, and achievement motivation.

The father's personality and behavior are as important as the mother's to the overall adjustment of the child. This fact was clearly established by a study which compared the behavior of parents whose children were well-adjusted with those whose children had adjustment difficulties (Peterson, Becker, Hellmer, Shoemaker, & Quay, 1959). The investigators were surprised to discover that both mothers and fathers of children with adjustment problems were themselves less well adjusted, less friendly, and less democratic than parents of the well-adjusted children. The maladjusted children who were very aggressive tended to have weak and ineffectual fathers, whereas children who were shy and had feelings of inferiority tended to have fathers who were dictatorial and unconcerned about their children.

Fathers may also be helpful by compensating for the limitations of the mother. Sally Bloom-Feshbach, Jonathan Bloom-Feshbach and Jane Gaughran (1980) studied how 3-year-old children of parents with different child rearing styles adjusted to being separated from their parents at nursery school. These investigators found that when both parents were not very nurturant and were either very strict or very lax in controlling the child, the child had a difficult adjustment to nursery school. When either mother or father was nurturant and firm in child-rearing style however, the child's adjustment was much easier.

In addition to having a direct impact on the child, the father also has an indirect influence on the child through his relationship with his wife. Marital strife can be very damaging to children. In fact, living in a house where parents are in discord may be more damaging to a child than living simply with one parent (Longfellow, 1979). Studies have shown, for example, that the quality of the marital relationship affects how a mother feeds the child. A mother is more effective in feeding a baby when the father is supportive of the mother and is less effective when there is tension and conflict in the marriage (Pederson, 1976). Parents who are critical of each other also express more negative feelings to their children (Pederson, Anderson, & Cain, in press).

When a father is involved in child care, the mother's burden is reduced and the quality of her child care improves dramatically. A mother who is less burdened by tasks for her children is also more available as a wife. Research has shown that marital satisfaction is greater among husbands and wives who share many activities together. Typically, however, when a child is born marital satisfaction decreases because the mother becomes much more involved in child care and participates less in activities with her husband. But when a father shares in child care, it can become another activity for husband and wife to enjoy together and thus enhance rather than reduce happiness between them. This has indeed been found to be true in a study of first-time fathers by Jonathan Bloom-Feshbach (1979). In this study, fathers who became involved with their child reported that their marriages were improved by the birth of the child whereas fathers who did not participate as much in their child's care felt that the birth of the child had detracted from the marriage.

We thus see how important the father is to the optimal development of his children. The father who is available to his children, who is warm, sensitive, and responsive to them, benefits them emotionally, intellectually, and socially. The research also demonstrates that the father helps his children not only directly but indirectly through his effect on the mother. A father who is supportive of the mother and participates in child care helps to improve her caretaking qualities since she will feel less overwhelmed by all the tasks that need to be accomplished for the child. And finally, a father who shares in child care with the mother enhances the quality of his marriage, which in turn affects the quality of child care that both parents provide the child.

The new findings showing the importance of the father are a needed corrective to the notion that the mother bears sole responsibility for the child's development. Another body of evidence which lightens mothers' burden, as well as fathers', is that which disputes the idea that the child begins life as a formless mass which parents shape to their own specifications. This idea gained popularity from John Watson and his disciples in American psychology. According to Watson, a child's mind is a tabula rasa or blank slate on which parents, by providing the right kind of experiences, write everything that the child is to become. In this climate of thought, it is no wonder that parents have taken seriously the messages coming from popular writings that they can give their children a superior mind, that children should be taught to read at the age of two, or that IQs can be raised dramatically if only the child is engaged in this or that regimen. Supporters of this environmental mystique have relied heavily on Joseph McVicker Hunt's book, Intelligence and Experience. This book has become the credo, almost the Bible of the environmental mystique. Dr. Hunt's book is a healthy, speculative, theoretical treatise, but the implications as they have been spelled out to the layperson are not so healthy. A number of years ago, Reader's Digest published an interview with Dr. Hunt. The article, in question and answer format, was heralded by a flier attached to the cover that read provocatively, "How to Raise Your Child's IQ by 20 Points."

The findings of an early compensatory program in New York City were reported in the New York press as having resulted in one point of IQ increase for every month the child had spent in the program. If IQs could indeed be increased this mechanically, one wonders why all parents would not immediately avail themselves of 30 or 40 months of such treatment for their children. In articles appearing in Harper's and the New York Times Magazine section, we were informed that the intelligence levels of poor children would be raised by subjecting them to an intellectually demanding "pressure-cooker" form of education during the preschool years. An issue of Life Magazine carried a feature article reporting the work of a group of Harvard-MIT scientists on the effects of infant stimulation. Cited was the finding that putting mobiles and other moving objects over cribs of young infants caused them to do better on certain developmental tasks than infants who were not exposed to these objects. What was not pointed out was that there was no relationship between the developmental abilities measured and later intelligence. Shortly after this article appeared, a mobile (properly endorsed by one of these scientists) became available commercially. As a result, we now frequently encounter what may be called the "mobile syndrome." Some mothers are so anxiety-laden about not having placed mobiles over their infants' cribs that they wonder what they can do to rectify the tragic error now that their children are 17 or 18.

What must be honestly told to parents is that there is no short-term intervention, no gadget, no gimmick, that clearly results in an elevated IQ at maturity. However, this fact has not deterred the suppliers of books and educational materials from inundating parents with their wares. Books on teaching children to read at the age of two are a case in point. Given all the developmental tasks that two-year-olds must master to develop into competent human beings, one would wonder why parents would want to waste their children's time by having them perform what amounts to little more than intellectual tricks. We can only surmise that such activities usually have much more to do with the egos of parents than with the ego development of their children.

Parents of young children, who have been hearing so much about how malleable their children's minds are, are seen by industry as a ready market for educational toys. Where once mothers and fathers went to toy stores in the hopes of obtaining an object that their child would enjoy, they are now more interested in "toys that teach." Some of these toys are indeed constructed on the basis of sound pscyhological and pedagogical theorizing and research, but many of them are pure junk.

Throughout this period there have been, of course, persons with the good sense to insist that almost any toy could teach if parents took the trouble to use it to arouse the child's curiosity and interest, and if they made playtime an occasion for social interaction between parent and child. Some specialists even had the temerity to state, wisely in our opinion, that the cognitive development of very young children has less to do with a formal learning intervention than with the natural exchange between children and their physical and social environments. Young children can learn more by playing with pots and pans, especially if

their parents play along with them, than with the rather expensvie toys parents buy in the hope of raising their children's IQs.

Given our nation's love of gadgetry, one could look upon the parents' search for books and toys which promise instant genius with some amusement, except for the dire consequences it has had upon children and family life. Over-emphasis on training the mind has led to a distorted view of parental tasks. The parent's job has come to be viewed as little more than programming a computer. In the process, we have lost sight of the child as a whole person with a unique personality, abilities, and needs. Today, parents must relearn that their goal should be to help their children achieve optimal development in all spheres--social, emotional, as well as intellectual.

Parents must also be helped to recognize that their child's development is not entirely in their own hands to shape, but that the child is endowed by nature with individuality and unique potential. One can provide a child with experiences conducive to his or her full intellectual growth. But parents must be clearly aware that there are individual differences between children, even between children in the same family, and that the impact of a child's experiences is determined in large part by the child's own nature. After acknowledging this, we should not jump from such an obvious truth to talking about inferiority or superiority. Children differ in all their abilities, and these differences are part of the human condition.

Anyone who observes newborns in a nursery notices immediately how much the babies differ from one another. Some cry a great deal, others cry very little; some are always moving around, others appear calmer; some have regular rhythms of sleep and wakefulness while others do not appear to have any regular patterns in these behaviors. These characteristics and some others make up what is known as the child's temperament. The child's temperament stabilizes by about four months of age and remains relatively constant throughout development. It is very important for parents to recognize, therefore, that they have very little control over the development of a number of traits of their children. These traits have been identified by Professors Alexander Thomas, Stella Chess, and Herbert Birch (1968) as the child's general activity level, the regularity of biological functions, mood, desire to approach or withdraw from new situations, attention span, persistence and distractability, sensitivity to sensory stimuli, and intensity of response to objects and events.

Thomas, Chess, and Birch traced the development of a group of individuals from infancy through adolescence. They identified three types of temperament in children, although many babies were not a pure type. The majority were identified as "easy" children. They had a pleasant mood, were regular in hunger, sleep and excretion patterns, tended to approach new objects and persons, and generally had low or moderate intensity of response. In the second category were "slow to warm up" children. These children had a slightly negative mood, were somewhat variable in biological rhythms, were wary of new situations, and had a low intensity of response. The investigators found that about one in 10 babies could be placed in the third category, labeled

difficult children. These children tended to cry often and quite loudly, seemed to be generally unhappy, were irregular in feeding and sleeping, and were slow to accept new foods or routines.

The fact that children are born with different temperaments has important implications for child development and child rearing. First, what should be reassuring to parents is that behavior patterns once thought to be the outcome of poor child rearing practices may actually be constitutional characteristics of the child. Thomas, Chess, and Birch (1968, p. 191) explain it this way:

> A child who stands at the periphery of the group in nursery school may be anxious and insecure, but he may also be expressing his normal temperamental tendency to warm up slowly. An infant with irregular sleep cycles who cries loudly at night may possibly be responding to a hostile, rejecting mother, but he may also be expressing his temperamental irregularity. A six-year-old who explodes with anger at his teacher's commands may be aggressive and oppositional, but he may also be showing the frustration reactions of a very persistent child when he is asked to terminate an activity in which he is deeply absorbed. A mother's guilt and anxiety may be the result of a deep-seated neurosis, but they may also be the result of her problems and confusion in handling an infant with a temperamental pattern [of] a very difficult child.

Although parents may not be responsible for their children's difficult temperaments, their reactions to their children's temperaments may have important consequences on many areas of development. Just as a parent's behavior influences that of the child, a child's behavior influences that of the parent. Children are not simply passive objects, receptacles of all that parents wish to put into them. Rather, children actively influence the kinds of behavior the parents transmit to the child. The notion of reciprocal interactions between parent and child, which is currently being examined by Richard Q. Bell (1979) and others, should sensitize parents to the importance of recognizing how their children affect their behavior. It is possible that difficult children may arouse negative responses in parents which may in turn have detrimental effects on the children's psychological development. An example of how this may occur was described by Arnold Sameroff (1977) from his study of interactions of a group of children and their mothers. He found that children judged as difficult at 4 months of age had the lowest intelligence test scores at 30 months. When he observed the interactions of the mothers and their children at 12 months of age, Sameroff found that mothers of difficult children tended to stay away from them more and to look at, stimulate, and play with them less than did mothers of other children. In contrast, children whose mothers spent a great deal of time socializing with them had higher intelligence test scores at 30 months of age. Sameroff suggests that children's difficult behavior may "turn off" their mothers to interacting with them. If this happens, the mother's lack of attention may result in decreased intellectual competence in the child later on.

Since children's behavior can affect parents' behavior, parents must be especially careful not to allow their own behavior to become as negative as that of their children. Otherwise a vicious circle of bad child behavior and bad parent behavior may develop which can lead to maladjustment in children and a frustrating, tension-filled existence for parents. Thomas, Chess, and Birch (1968) predicted that difficult children would need psychiatric treatment later in life. They found, however, that only those difficult children whose parents had been unable to adapt to their children's temperaments and indivdual needs later required clinical help.

Thus an important principle for parents to remember is that child rearing practices should be adjusted to each child's temperament. All children cannot be treated alike. By recognizing and understanding a child's individual temperament, however, parents may be better able to guide the growth of their children. For example, parents who have slow to warm up children should not pressure them to accept and adjust to new situations quickly, for this may only strengthen their fears and tendency to withdraw. Parents can help these children to anticipate their fears and reassure them that they will be able to adapt to new objects and events. Otherwise, a slow to warm up child may turn out like a boy named Bobby (Segal & Yahraes, 1978). Whenever Bobby rejected new food, his parents never gave it to him again; because he shied away from the kids at the playground, they kept him at home. At the age of 10, Bobby had no friends and ate only hamburgers, applesauce, and medium-boiled eggs! In contrast, the parents of a difficult boy named Carl (Chess & Thomas, 1977) learned to anticipate their son's frequently stormy responses to new experiences and to be patient with his tantrums without giving in to his demands. They encouraged and reassured Carl and modified their own expectations and behavior in accordance with their child's temperament. As a result, Carl never developed a serious behavior disorder.

Once parents and the rest of society begin to appreciate the uniqueness of each child, they will begin to see that children simply cannot be molded, as John Watson believed, into what others want them to become. This is not to say that children are born with a fixed personaltiy which remains unchanged throughout life. The child is born with a rather fixed temperament, which means that he or she is predisposed toward reacting in certain ways. The child's personality, however, develops from all that the child experiences, as filtered and fashioned by his or her temperament. Personality, therefore, is a product of both the inborn temperamental style and external parental and environmental influences that reach the child.

As powerful as parents and the child's own behavioral predispositions are in influencing children's development, these are not the only contributing factors. Parents and children do not exist in a vacuum. They are located in an environmental setting containing among other things, friends, and acquaintances, inanimate objects, and social institutions. The child will be affected by the neighborhood, the school, peers, the media, health care, the state of the economy--indeed, the whole of the physical and social environment to which the child is exposed.

Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) has underscored the importance of the whole ecology or environment of the child in determining what the child becomes. He has also pointed out how parents' behavior is affected by the broader environment, too. In societies in which extended families are the norm, parenting does not appear to be as difficult or anxiety-provoking as in societies where nuclear families prevail. The presence of grandparents and other clan members may relieve many of parents' practical needs and provide emotional support to the parents. A tragic example of what can happen when such support is not available can be seen in many cases of child abuse. Although there are many factors that make parents neglect or strike out at children, one that emerges with great regularity is a parent's sense of alienation and aloneness. The abusing parent generally feels a great burden of responsibility which cannot be mitigated because there is no one the parent can turn to for help.

Another significant factor in the child's ecology has been shown to have an important impact on development by Kenneth Keniston and the Carnegie Council on Children in their book, All Our Children. This element is the economic system of the country. Children whose parents are chronically unemployed will undoubtedly be adversely affected. Children whose family incomes are below the poverty level will also suffer. Not only will these children be deprived of services and experiences that money can buy, but more importantly, as the Carnegie report points out, if a child sees too many doors closed to the adults he or she knows best, the child may learn "to expect failure of himself just as the world expects it of him." In addition, children are affected by the length of the work day in American industry and by industry's decision about whether its employees are to be moved from city to city every few years. They are influenced too by their parents' frequent inability to find or afford satisfactory day care arrangements. And children are affected by the ever-changing regulations concerning the availability of food stamps as well as a thousand and one other decisions made by government at the federal, state, and local levels.

It is becoming clear that our society has a special responsibility to children. Since parents are not the only socializing agents for children, their efforts alone cannot ensure the best possible developmental outcome for their children. To promote optimal development, parents can no longer remain content to simply do their best for children at home. They must also begin to do their best for children in the public domain. They must speak out when the media treat children as only consumers to be manipulated and exploited. They must also let their voices be heard when a governmental policy, either by omission or commission, threatens the well-being of children. They must do whatever they can to improve the national climate for child rearing. In short they must become nothing less than social activists and effective advocates on behalf of children.

An appreciation for the many elements contributing to child development suggests, therefore, that parents should expand their role. They should not only be private parents, trying to maximize their own personal effectiveness in helping their children grow, but they should

also enter the public arena, speakng out and lobbying for a society more responsive and supportive of children's needs. This may be more work for parents, but it is work that must be done. The rewards that will emerge will be numerous. Parents will have the pleasure of knowing they are doing all they can for their children. Many of their anxieties will be reduced as the rest of society comes to share in the tasks of child rearing. And most importantly, children will benefit from being reared in an environment where all the conditions--from mothers and fathers to business hours and children's toys--are designed to foster their optimal development.

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